United Nations E/CN.17/2000/17

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
27 March 2000

Original: English

Commission on Sustainable Development
Eighth session
24 April-5 May 2000
Item 8 of the provisional agenda*
Other matters

Follow-up work on voluntary initiatives and agreements

Report of the Secretary-General

1. The ongoing multi-stakeholder process on voluntary initiatives and agreements was initiated by the Commission on Sustainable Development at its sixth session in April 1998. In response to proposals made by stakeholders during the session's multi-stakeholder dialogue segment on the role of industry, the Commission supported the idea of a multi-stakeholder process to identify the key elements that could be considered in a review of voluntary initiatives and agreements.[1] In follow-up to the Commission's decision, a steering group composed of representatives from business, trade unions, non-governmental organizations, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Division for Sustainable Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat was created to coordinate the activities aiming to identify the key elements of voluntary initiatives and agreements. Among other things, the steering group organized a multi-stakeholder consultation meeting with participants from the three stakeholder groups, and Governments of developed and developing countries, as well as UNEP and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in Toronto, Canada. This consultative meeting identified a set of key elements on voluntary initiatives and agreements. The outcome of the Toronto meetings as well as other products of the work in the period 1998-1999 was reported by the Commission secretariat to the Commission at its seventh session (see E/CN.17/1999/12).

2. The Commission on Sustainable Development at its seventh session[2] noted the input made by the stakeholders at the Toronto meeting, recognized the value of continued multi-stakeholder processes and consultations to further the understanding of the potential and impact of voluntary initiatives and agreements in achieving sustainable development, and requested the process to continue including its multi-stakeholder nature. Among other things, the Commission requested further work in this area including information products on voluntary initiatives and agreements in general and on their potential use and impact in developing countries, as well as information tools, such as the tool kit on voluntary initiatives and agreements proposed at the Toronto meeting.

3. Based on the decisions of the Commission on Sustainable Development and a formal request from the stakeholder partners, the Commission secretariat continued to act as a facilitator of the multi-stakeholder steering group to coordinate further work on voluntary initiatives and agreements. In this role, the

* E/CN.17/2000/1.

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Commission secretariat organized periodic teleconference calls with the partners (once every four to five weeks), facilitated exchanges of information by e-mail and other means, and assisted the partners in developing a work programme for the steering group.

4. The steering group considered a number of approaches to respond to the requests of the Commission on Sustainable Development at its seventh session. The partners' discussions focused on developing the tool kit on voluntary initiatives and agreements, identifying further information needs, identifying relevant processes organized by stakeholder groups (individually or jointly), explored the means for testing the key elements identified in Toronto and assessed the need for, and feasibility of, further consultative meetings with Governments and stakeholders.

5. Further consultation meetings similar to the Toronto meeting of March 1999 were not planned owing to the need to bring to maturity other issues under discussion. The steering group did agree to organize a small consultative forum that would bring together the main stakeholder partners (business, trade unions and non-governmental organizations), together with a number of developing country Governments and the developed country Governments that had participated in the Toronto meeting. Such a meeting is scheduled for the second week of the eighth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development. The aim of this forum is to clarify, particularly through discussions with developing countries, what kind of information needs to be generated on the potential use and impact of voluntary initiatives and agreements in developing countries. In addition to this forum, a one-day meeting will be organized by the non-governmental organization component of the steering group (possibly on 28 April 2000) to take an analytical look at three voluntary codes of conduct developed by international organizations.[1]

6. Discussions on the further development of the tool kit idea have been inconclusive. Although all partners agree that a tool kit would be very useful and should be produced, agreement on its scope and content has not been reached. Partners plan to continue their discussions on the tool kit and hope to complete such a product by the tenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development as an input to the 10-year review of progress in 2002.

7. For its part, the Commission on Sustainable Development secretariat has completed analytical and case studies related to voluntary initiatives and agreements. The first is a background paper that the secretariat has commissioned on an analytic overview of the existing processes focusing on voluntary initiatives and agreements and their reviews in intergovernmental and governmental forums. The consultative forum mentioned above will use this study as a background paper.

8. The second initiative is a joint project of the Commission on Sustainable Development secretariat and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Technology, Business and Environment Program of the Center for Technology, Policy, and Industrial Development. The partners expect to launch the project in May 2000, pending the availability of funding. The focus of this project is to examine the potentials of voluntary initiatives and agreements in a selected number of developing countries and one country with an economy in transition. The preliminary list of countries where this study will be conducted include Brazil, China, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Mexico and South Africa. The methodology will be based on MIT's prior analyses of voluntary initiatives and agreements, such as those focusing on the Responsible Care programme of the Chemical Manufacturers Association, and the analytical framework it has helped to develop.

9. In response to the request of the Commission on Sustainable Development to make information on voluntary initiatives and agreements available electronically, the Commission secretariat has created a web site (www.un.org/esa/sustdev/via.htm) where interested parties can find the key elements identified in Toronto as well as a collection of profiles of existing voluntary initiatives and agreements. Other products such as the tool kit, and analytic studies currently in progress will be included in this site, which also furnishes links to relevant actors such as the members of the steering group.

Notes

[1] "The Commission noted the potential value of a review of voluntary initiatives and agreements to give content and direction to the dialogue between Governments and the representatives of industry, trade unions, non-governmental organizations and international organizations. As a first step, representatives of industry,

trade unions and non-governmental organizations should examine voluntary initiatives and agreements to identify those elements that can be considered for this review" (*Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1998, Supplement No. 9* (E/1998/29), chap. I, sect. B, decision 6/2, sect. D, para. 18).

[2] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1999, Supplement No. 9* (E/1999/29), chap. I, sect. C, decision 7/6.

[3] The list of codes to be reviewed in this workshop include the International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (Rome, FAO, 1986); the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)/World Health Organization (WHO) International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes (Geneva, WHO, 1981); and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) guidelines for multinational enterprises.